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The Relationship Between Institutional, Course-Level and Individual Teaching Excellence in Higher Education: a proposal for developing competitive advantage through leveraging the expertise of excellent university teachers

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Abstract

Internationally many nations are seeking to recognise and reward excellent teaching at an institutional, subject and individual level, acknowledging the importance of outstanding teaching as a contribution to positive student learning experiences through students' academic, emotional and transactional engagement. This paper explores the ways in which higher education teaching excellence can be recognised and rewarded, using a case study from the UK, and considers the relationship between institutional, course-level and individual teaching excellence. We conclude by proposing that HEIs can develop a competitive advantage through leveraging the expertise of excellent university teachers to the benefit of learners.

<http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/263>

Introduction

Across the globe, the higher education sector is exploring mechanisms by which excellent teaching can be identified and the outputs of excellent teaching can be measured. Schemes that recognise individual teaching excellence are now well established in many countries, for example, the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards in New Zealand, the Irish Teaching Expert Awards, the US 'Professor of the year' awards, the Canadian 3M National Teaching Fellowship scheme and the UK National Teaching Fellowship scheme (NTFS). More recent initiatives globally aim to measure teaching excellence across courses and even across whole institutions. Using current developments in the UK as a case study, this paper sets out to consider what the relationship is, if any, between individual teaching excellence, institutional teaching excellence and university imperatives in a marketised environment. The paper proposes that it is possible to view individual and institutional teaching excellence criteria through a common lens and that by doing so it is possible to identify the critical institutional success factors. It is suggested that there are implications in a proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for how institutions should conceptualise and recognise excellent teaching at both the individual and course level and how they should align H.R. strategies to provide excellent teaching and excellent leadership that meets student and institutional needs.

Current developments: Institutional Teaching Excellence in the UK: The Teaching Excellence Framework

In the UK in 'Teaching at the Heart of the System' (1 July 2015), the HE Minister, Jo Johnson, announced the impending implementation of a new national Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) with the noble aim of ensuring that all students receive an excellent teaching experience which encourages original thinking, and are prepared for the world of work, while setting out to build an HE culture where teaching has equal status with research and excellent teachers enjoy the same professional recognition and opportunities for career and pay progression as

great researchers. He claims it will also be designed to include incentives that reward institutions that do best at retention and progression of disadvantaged students and will also provide students with the information they need to judge teaching quality. Notably, the outputs of a TEF are to be linked with the ability of UK universities receiving high TEF scores to increase fees above the rate of inflation. The metric will therefore seek to serve multiple and potentially conflicting aims.

In his seminal article on the implications of dimensions of quality in a market environment Gibbs makes clear that the issues around teaching excellence and reputation are problematic and complex,

“It is not yet clear whether institutional attempts to improve National Student Survey (NSS) scores and other quality indicators is having any effect on student recruitment, let alone on learning gains. To a large extent the market is perceived to be driven by reputation, just as in the past. US research shows that reputation tells you almost nothing about educational quality, use of effective educational practices, or learning gains, but merely reflects research performance, resources and fee levels. It is uncertain whether the use of more valid indicators of educational quality will gradually change perceptions of what reputation is about, and turn it into a more useful guide to student choice.” (Gibbs, 2012, p8)

To bring the UK TEF system into use quickly, it is likely that existing data would be used to estimate ‘excellent teaching’, such as retention statistics, achievement (possibly supplemented with learning gain metrics once available), the percentages of students in graduate level jobs as measured by the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education Survey (DLHE), and undergraduate student satisfaction levels as measured by the National Student Survey. At the time of writing, work is ongoing developing the detail of possible metrics for learning gain, widening participation and finalising changes to the National Student Survey questions.

Joe Johnson, the Universities and Science Minister, said at a fringe event at the Conservative party conference in Manchester on 6 October 2015 that

“widening participation and access will be intimately linked to the TEF. One of the core metrics we envisage using in the TEF will be the progress and value add [for] students from disadvantaged backgrounds, measuring it for example in terms of their retention and completion rates” (Morgan, 2015)

Nevertheless, it is clear that the TEF will be based around three broad areas we have identified: academic, emotional and transactional engagement of students and these are areas that are widely applicable across many nations seeking to recognise excellence: (figure 1).

The Three Aspects of Teaching the TEF will use to assess Institutional Teaching Excellence.

a. Students’ academic engagement

Teaching excellence metrics will include some measurement of students’ achievement. This may be related to learning gain measures once developed. From 2017 the National Student Survey will capture student perceptions of the extent to which they feel they have been challenged to achieve their best work through intellectually stimulating courses that provide opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth, to bring information and ideas together from different topics and to apply what has been learnt. Likewise, student perceptions of the quality of support provided by staff who make the subject interesting, are good at explaining things, and who provide helpful comments and timely feedback will also be indicators of institutional opportunities for students to academically engage (HEFCE consultation on NSS and Unistats, 2015.).

b. Students’ emotional engagement

Referencing, in defining teaching excellence, student retention measures (alongside contextual widening participation data), represents a departure from the historical paradigm of excellence being defined purely in academic terms. Institutions will be expected to provide opportunities for all their students to feel part of a community of staff and students and to work with other students as part of their course, to be able to contact staff and to be given advice and support with their studies and study choices (HEFCE consultation 2015 *op cit*) Whilst UK institutions

have for many years been working to a national student access and success agenda, the explicit linking of inclusion and retention and how students 'feel', with the quality of teaching potentially broadens the notion of academic practice and moves the imperative from excellence in disciplinary research to excellence in emotional engagement of students.

c. Students' transactional engagement

Probably the most dramatic paradigm shift in higher education is the emergent understanding that the quality of H.E. teaching is in part measurable in terms of student satisfaction with the transactional arrangements provided whilst they are studying, and in part in terms of their employability following graduation. Institutions will be measured on students engaging with well-organised courses that run smoothly, where changes in the course or teaching are communicated effectively, supported by a timetabling system that works efficiently as far as each student's activities are concerned. Student perceptions relating to assessment arrangements and the fairness of marking and of how well their learning has been supported by library, IT and subject specific resources when needed will be captured. Excellent teaching will be informed by students providing feedback on their course, staff valuing students' views and opinions about the course and students being clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on. (HEFCE consultation *op cit*).

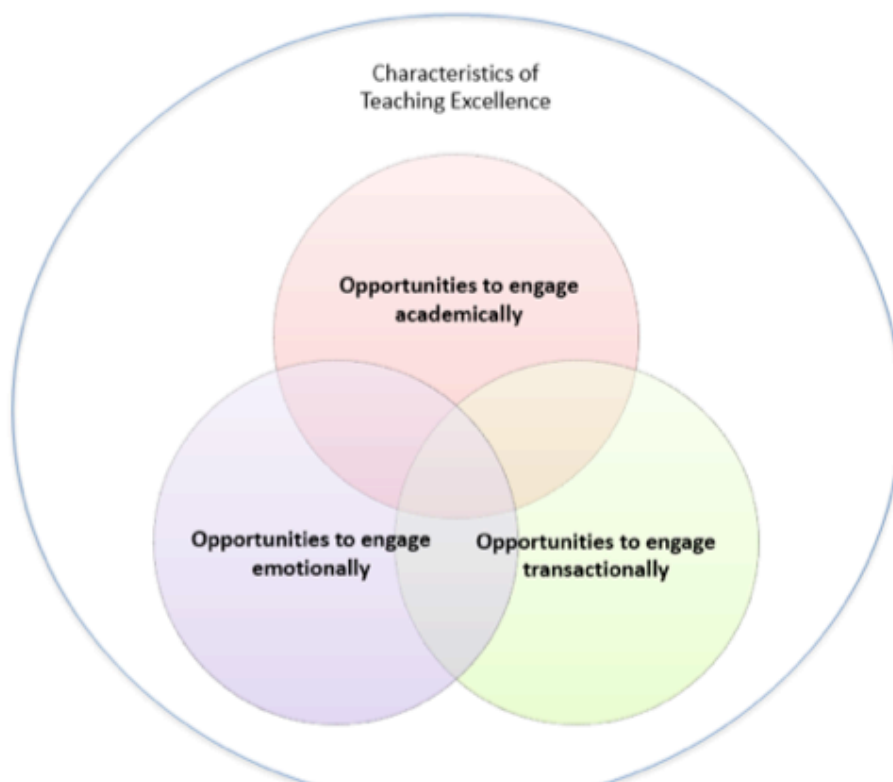


Figure 1: Evidence that will inform judgements of excellent teaching (as measured by an institutional TEF based on retention, achievement, employability and satisfaction metrics).

The purpose of an institutional TEF and implications for professional recognition of excellent teachers.

Where nations propose adopting a teaching excellence framework, this could be at an institutional, subject or individual level. As an *institutional* level TEF using these quantitative metrics can neither provide information to students about their return on investment of studying in a particular *course*, nor measure the excellence of *individual* teaching, it might be concluded that the principal intention of an institutional TEF is to regulate fees. The implications of this are clear. A fees-determining TEF will require those HEIs dependent upon fees to adopt business models to build their capabilities to provide opportunities for their students to engage transactionally, engage emotionally, engage academically, and to move on to graduate level

employment.

Traditionally, in a higher education system where universities were, by both those within and beyond them, regarded primarily as academic institutions, it was accepted that those best qualified to teach students were research-active academics exploring ideas and concepts of a discipline in depth. This is currently being called into doubt by students and their representative bodies (NUS 2015), who wish to see a greater focus on teaching quality. Current recognition systems within universities tend to reward individual excellence in research, through professorial appointments.

Whilst research-intensive universities have always prioritised individuals' research profiles in recruitment and promotions policies, for many HEIs, teaching and learning and the student experience has been the principal business. However, this has typically not been reflected in academic career trajectories. One reason for this is that research excellence has had high profile funding, and individual and institutional kudos associated with it, and another, that it has been difficult to identify criteria for and transparently measure excellent individual teaching. A relatively recent development in many post-92 UK universities, fuelled by concerns about Research Excellence Framework (REF) funding and league table placing, has been the introduction of a requirement for academic staff to hold PhDs. In some institutions, in particular those with institutional portfolios largely made up of professional and vocational courses, this has impacted both on the ability to recruit staff and on the delivery of courses. However, the marketisation of higher education and the introduction of a TEF based on emotional, transactional and academic engagement of students challenges this model. In a system where most funding follows the student, it is unsustainable for all but a few institutions to regard research as their principal *raison d'être*, and to continue to promote academic staff on the basis of research only.

Whilst it is expected that any TEF would be developed incrementally over a number of years the groundwork is now in place for institutions to develop a strategy that will recruit, engage, support, develop, and empower staff to provide excellent opportunities for students to engage emotionally, academically and transactionally.

Teaching Excellence Frameworks at a subject level

At the time of writing, it looks likely that the UK will implement a TEF at subject level, which has benefits in allowing for greater granularity in the use of metrics, but some fear it will lead to a reversion to the historic and very cumbersome model of Subject Review as utilised formerly in the UK by the Quality Assurance Agency. This was labour intensive and highly bureaucratic as well as being open to 'gaming the system'. If the UK is to introduce the potential for HEIs to raise fees according to outcomes of a subject-level TEF, this is likely to result in many anomalies in institutional fee regimes which will be complex to administer. However, in terms of providing information to students to help them choose courses it could be valuable, although not all will feel they can afford higher fees, so there is a danger capable students will be put off applying to the 'best courses'.

The role of the individually excellent and professional teachers in achieving institutional level teaching excellence

In a sector as diverse and as complex as higher education it is to be expected that there will be innumerable views on what constitutes excellent individual teaching, and that perceptions of which characteristics are most important will vary according to subject discipline, type of university, context, and whether we ask current students, alumni, peers or managers. George Kuh in US for example has identified five interrelated effective educational practices: the level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student/faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences and a supportive campus environment.

Handal and Lauvas (1987) in the Netherlands argue for a "practical theory" to underpin teachers' actions, which is informed by their knowledge of how learning happens as well as by their experiences of their own and others' teaching. Importantly, it is also shaped by their ideology about higher education and their expectations of their students and tends to be affected by their values in relation to higher education.

McKeachie in the US suggests that "effective lecturers combine the talents of a scholar, writer, producer, comedian, showman and teacher in ways that contribute to student learning. (McKeachie et al p.53)

Paul Ramsden who works in the UK and Australia proposes that high quality teaching

"implies recognising that students must be engaged with the content of learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach understanding...Sharp engagement, imaginative inquiry and finding of a suitable level and style are all more likely to occur if teaching methods that necessitate student energy, problem solving and cooperative learning are employed". (Ramsden, 2003, p97)

Bain (2004) in the US says excellent teachers ask these questions as they prepare to teach:

"What should my students be able to do intellectually, physically, or emotionally as a result of their learning? How can I best help and encourage them to develop those abilities and habits of the heart and to use them? How can my students and I best understand the nature, quality, and progress of their learning? How can I evaluate my efforts to foster that learning?" (Bain, 2004 p. 49)

This diversity of perspectives nevertheless has considerable commonality and agreement about the attributes and behaviours of outstanding teachers.

In the UK there are two complementary, nationally recognised schemes hosted on behalf of the sector by the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) that have been devised to recognise professionalism and excellence in HE teaching. These schemes are, respectively, the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS). Each of the schemes is based upon a framework of criteria and each framework

highlights different components of professional and excellent teaching that can usefully inform institutional business models.

A case study: The UK National Teaching Fellowship Scheme.

Globally, there are now many established national individual teaching excellence award schemes that use an agreed set of indicators of excellence. Criteria to judge teaching excellence at a national level through these schemes have some considerable overlap. For example, the Carnegie scheme in the US seeks applicants who can demonstrate:

- ‘Impact on and involvement with undergraduate students;
- Scholarly approach to teaching and learning;
- Contributions to undergraduate education in the institution, community and profession;
- Support from colleagues and current and former undergraduate students’.

In New Zealand, the Tertiary Teaching Award requires applicants to provide a portfolio covering a breadth of teaching and learning support activities which are judged on the basis of:

- a track record of successful teaching or facilitation of learning appropriate to his/her context (e.g. type of [institution]; small group/large group/face to face/on-line/distance/workbased)
- enthusiasm for subject and for learning
- teaching and learning strategies that are appropriate to context and actively engage students
- support for students to build confidence and capability
- innovation in delivery of course materials
- other unique contributions related to delivery of learning/materials.

Other national schemes don’t always specify criteria precisely but broadly cover the same ground.

The UK National Teaching Fellowship Scheme is a highly competitive and highly valued individual recognition scheme established in 2000, and awarding up to 55 NTFs each year. When setting up the UK National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) in 2000, the following characteristics of an excellent H.E. teacher were identified, drawing on the literature cited above, as being common to schemes elsewhere in the world:

- Is passionate about teaching;
- Demonstrates empathy and emotional intelligence;
- Has a student-centred orientation to teaching.
- Adopts a scholarly approach to the practice of teaching;
- Regularly reviews innovations in learning and teaching and tries out ones relevant to own context;
- Is reflective and regularly reviews own practice;
- Knows subject material thoroughly;
- Ensures that assessment practices are fit for purpose and contribute to learning;
- Is well organised and plans curriculum effectively.

These characteristics can be viewed in terms of a teachers' *emotional* engagement with their teaching and their students (passion, empathy and student-centred orientation), their *academic* engagement with their teaching and their students (scholarly approach, review and reflection, for example through peer observation, (Race *et al*), and their *transactional* engagement with their teaching and their students (knowledge, practice and organisation) (Figure 2). These are the same three broad areas that will underpin the TEF and that students will be questioned about on the NSS. The UK National Teaching Fellowship Scheme uses three criteria. The criteria clearly align with this model:

1. Individual excellence: evidence of enhancing and transforming the student learning experience commensurate with the individual's context and the opportunities afforded by it (level of transactional engagement with teaching and learning practice);

2. Raising the profile of excellence: evidence of supporting colleagues and influencing support for student learning; demonstrating impact and engagement beyond the nominee's immediate academic or professional role (level of emotional engagement with the teaching and learning community);
3. Developing excellence: evidence of the nominee's commitment to her/his ongoing professional development with regard to teaching and learning and/or learning support (level of academic engagement with teaching and learning concepts).

The complex peer-reviewed NTF system takes account of different approaches being used in different disciplines, and whilst not evidence-based (although it is quality assured to some extent by institutional sign off at the most senior level) enables those going forward to use both qualitative comments and quantitative data to be cited within the application. This highly nuanced, peer-reviewed approach is very different from the rough and ready approach being proposed by the UK government currently to measure teaching excellence of institutions in the Teaching Excellence Framework.

However, the parallels between the criteria used to judge teaching excellence in the National Teaching Fellowship scheme (and similar schemes globally) and the proposed TEF are interesting. The three criteria used by UK peer-reviewers evidence that NTFs have not only been judged to be nationally excellent in teaching, but national leaders who impact on the teaching practice of peers in the sector. They are a potentially valuable institutional resource in an institutional context that requires academic staff to move to a new engagement paradigm,

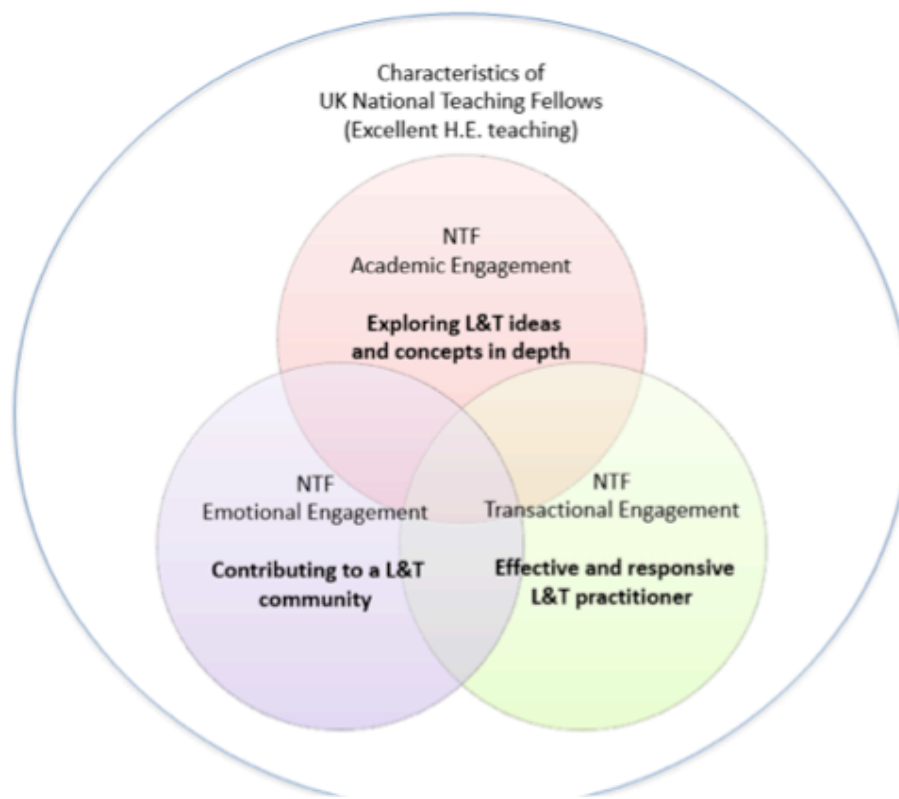


Figure 2a: Characteristics common to National Individual Teaching Excellence Schemes across the world including the UK NTFS.

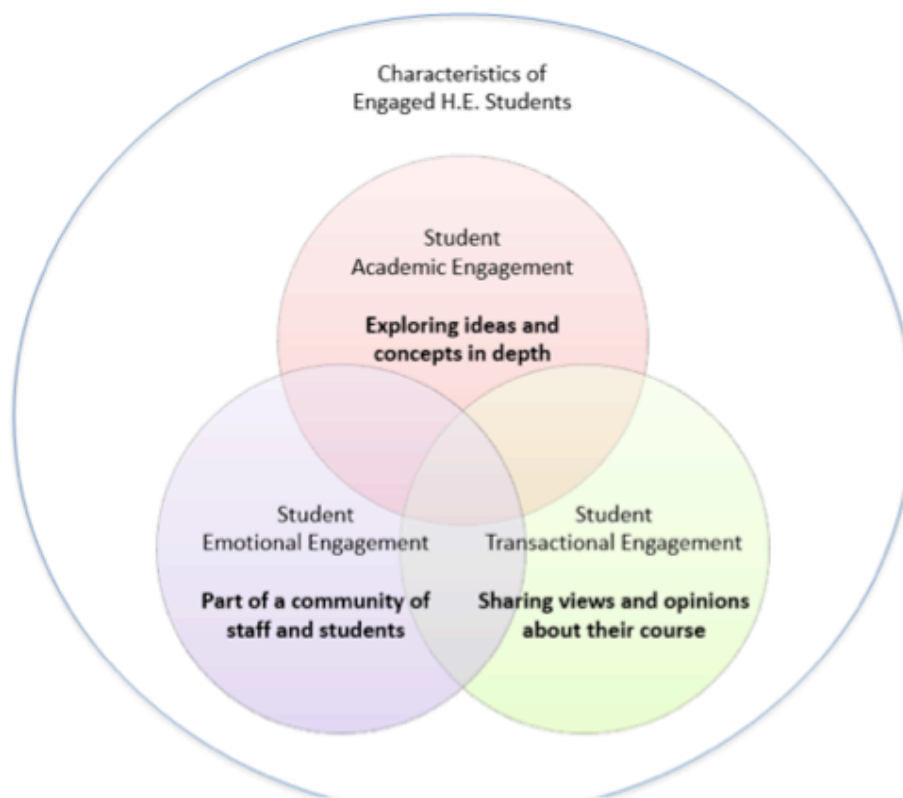


Figure 2b: Focus of the new student engagement questions on the NSS from 2017.

UK Professional Standards Framework.

The UK Professional Standard Framework (UKPSF) is an internationally recognised framework based on dimensions of professional values, core knowledge and areas of activity for staff teaching and supporting in higher education. The UKPSF is a system of recognition that if used strategically, can support reflection and development of those involved in supporting learning in higher education. The Framework was developed to recognise competence and professionalism (as opposed to the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme which recognises excellence) in learning and teaching. The framework has the advantage of now being recognised and understood by many practitioners, having been embedded into some institutional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Over a thousand individuals beyond the UK have achieved fellowships at various levels, and the UKPSF has been adopted as a framework

by institutions in several nations including Bahrain and Australia. It is anticipated that this trend towards international adoption will increase substantially and that other nations will devise or adapt their own parallel schemes.

As can be seen from figure 3, the dimensions of practice align particularly well with the proposed elements of the TEF and in particular with the revised 2017 NSS questions. This is particularly significant because a shared conceptualisation of teaching quality suggests that an institution that supports staff to developmentally engage with the UKPSF might expect to see improvements in the NSS.

Figure 3: Conceptualisations of teaching excellence in higher education using academic, emotional and transactional engagement lenses: The relationship between professional standards and NSS questions.



- a. Dimensions of the National Student Survey (from 2017): Quantitative measures of student perceptions;



b. Dimensions of the UK Professional Standards Framework: professional values, knowledge and activities.

Positioning of the course, the course leader, the professional teacher (HEA Fellow) and the individually excellent teacher (NTF) in relation to the TEF

It appears that a judgement about institutional teaching excellence will be derived from the top-level amalgamation of course level metrics. The course team, rather than the individual, is therefore the principal unit of measurement of institutional excellence of teaching. Given the pivotal position the course will occupy in the Teaching Excellence Framework, the optimum role for HEA Fellows (and Senior Fellows) and National Teaching Fellows should be considered. Effective course teams may conceivably be formed from bringing together specialists with expertise in different areas (research, teaching, learning design, curriculum management, student support etc.). The make up the team and the synergies between the course team members are more important than the individual strengths of any member. However, in a case where all members of a course team are developmentally engaged with the UKPSF as HEA

Fellows or Senior Fellows it may be expected that this would have a positive impact on NSS scores as the elements of each are well-aligned.

NTFs and institutional champions of teaching are potentially highly valuable to an institution in a range of leadership roles including course leadership, school or faculty leadership, or in central strategic roles.

Excellent and professional teachers as Course Leaders

Given the requirement for each course to provide excellent opportunities for students to engage transactionally, emotionally and academically, the appointment, development and retention of Course Leaders who are able to design, lead and manage excellent opportunities in all three domains is strategically important to the institution. Structurally, the role and status of Course Leader needs to be configured to provide role-holders with authority to academically lead the whole course team including students, as well as to control all transactional inputs (e.g. timetabling, staffing and resources) as well as being able to set the emotional tone of a course. Professional course leadership involves managing a complex matrix of staff and student requirements and this needs to be recognised and rewarded.

Excellent and professional teachers in academic leadership roles

Secondly, excellent teachers can be used to provide leadership to colleagues at levels above the course. If HEI funding is dependent upon teaching excellence, then a strategic institutional response is to ensure that leadership at all levels of the organisation – Module and Course leadership, School and Faculty leadership, and Institutional leadership including Senior Management - is entrusted to those who are expert in the requirements and the complexities of teaching excellence and able to inspire others. In the UK for example increasing numbers of Vice Chancellors and Pro-Vice-Chancellors are achieving Principal Fellowships. Hybrid university teachers, who evidence both expertise in effectively engaging students and in

modelling in their own practice all the desirable elements are as well-placed to lead academic staff as they are to lead students, or to provide institutional strategic leadership in this emerging national H.E. context.

Conclusions and recommendations

Schemes that recognise individual teaching excellence at national level and within institutions are now well established in many countries including in the UK. This paper argues that the TEF is likely to define excellent teaching in terms that align closely with the globally accepted characteristics of individual teaching excellence. It has also sought to demonstrate the close relationship between the UKPSF and the proposed 2017 UK National Student Survey questions.

Emerging imperatives for institutions to evidence institutional teaching excellence require that universities consider their traditional business models and ensure that corporate planning, staffing and recognition and reward systems align with the business requirements to engage students academically, transactionally and emotionally. Teaching excellence frameworks and individual recognition schemes can potentially bring about a rebalancing of teaching, research and administrative priorities within those institutions that recognise this and ultimately lead to better student experiences.

In this paper we have identified the relationship between the emerging university imperatives in a marketised environment and individual teaching excellence. We recommend that institutions which derive a significant proportion of funding from student fees, as well as those that recognise the value to the nation from having a highly qualified populace and hence provide funding for university tuition, should encourage staff to engage developmentally with context-contingent teaching excellence frameworks and schemes for individual recognition of teacher capability. This will enable them to make the very best possible use of their individually excellent teachers to provide first rate course leadership and to provide outstanding

management of core business at all levels of the organisation to meet both student and institutional needs.

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